

Springfield Union Station demolition begins, completion seen in fall of 2016

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SPRINGFIELD - Like prehistoric monsters, the booms of earth-moving equipment stretched out Monday to devour chunks of Springfield's **Union Station** as politicians gathered below to speak of how the long-planned rehabilitation of Springfield's grand train station will spark economic development on the north side of the city's downtown.

The demolition of the long-disused baggage warehouse adjacent to the main station is the first progress in the **\$82 million project** visible from the street and apparent to passers-by. The space once occupied by the baggage warehouse will be part of a bus depot. Inside the station's still-ornate main concourse will be ticketing areas for buses and trains, a waiting area, some retail space on the first floor and offices on the upper floors. A full renovation, not the phased project spoken about earlier, is now scheduled to be completed about 18 months from now in fall 2016, said Kevin Kennedy, the city's chief economic development officer.

U.S. Rep. **Richard E. Neal**, D-Springfield, spoke of how he announced his first run for political office, a seat on the city council here, at Union Station in 1977.

"We were going to have a new Union Station," Neal said. Well now it is here."

The project kept falling through and getting delayed. Neal thanked Mayor Domenic J. Sarno, Gov. Deval Patrick and former U. S. Secretary of Transportation Ray La Hood, a longtime Neal colleague in the House, for their help.

"It always fascinated me that there was always money available for this project. The will just wasn't there," Neal said. "Well, now we have the will to do it. A grand Union Station has always been part of the plan for Springfield. And in a few years it is going to be here for everyone."

Clerk of the works LeRoy Clink, who works for general contractor **Skanska USA**, said the building warehouse wing with its masonry wall several feet thick and 30 feet high, will be down in a few weeks. From there workers will move on to clear the foundation and the rubble. It should be all gone in early January.

A tower atop the station will come down as part of the baggage building demolition. The main station, to the east of the baggage building, will remain.

Kennedy said workers literally had to saw the baggage building from the rest of the station and from the track side retaining wall. They then had to shore up the earthen berm holding the tracks and rebuild the wall so the tracks would remain stable.

The baggage building handled luggage, mail and package freight from the station's construction in 1926 until that business was lost to trucks in 1950s. Most of the station closed in 1973 although Amtrak still uses a tiny portion on the Lyman Street side as a depot.

Clink is happy his career brought him back to Union Station. He remembered his father taking him through Union Station as a boy on their way to New York City's Grand Central Terminal.

Neal said generations of Springfield residents have similar memories.

Demolition of Union Station baggage building

"This project has a hold on our nostalgia," Neal said, describing how generations of young men left Springfield for war from Union Station and then made their return from the service. "They used to have parades right here when the men returned."

In the future, Union Station will provide a vital transit link for those who want to work, live, shop or play downtown, Sarno said. Developers are interested in building market rate housing nearby because the station will be there.

The new Union Station will also serve as a northern counterpoint to the MGM Springfield casino project on the South End. The idea is to have travelers move between to two creating business opportunities along the way.

In addition, there will be more trains to take.

Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont used federal stimulus money to update the north-south rail lines through Springfield, Neal said.

Timothy Brennan, executive director of the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission, said that track work should be done later this month. The first regular Amtrak train, the Vermonter, should be using the new, smoother and faster tracks by Dec. 29.

Plans call for there to be as many as 25 trains a day from Springfield to New Haven.

State and federal planners are also studying expanded east-west service through Boston.

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